

VZCZCXRO6354
PP RUEHBI RUEHCI
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ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 151327Z DEC 06
FM AMCONSUL CALCUTTA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1309
INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 1187
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 0478
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 0476
RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 1615

UNCLAS CALCUTTA 000558

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ECON](#) [SOC](#) [EINV](#) [ETRD](#) [ASEC](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: ANOTHER STRIKE HURTS WEST BENGAL

REF: CALCUTTA 0454, CALCUTTA 0540

¶1. (U) Summary: On December 14 the 24-hour all India bandh (strike) called by the Center for Indian Trade Unions (CITU) against the economic policies of the Central government brought the entire state of West Bengal to a grinding halt. Flights and trains to and from Calcutta were cancelled and shops remained shuttered. Private firms were almost entirely closed, while state government offices reported minimal attendance. Reformist Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, who had earlier claimed that 24-7 industries like the IT sector would not be affected by the strike, found that many IT employees could not reach their offices. This was the third strike in December alone, and arguably the most damaging to the state's efforts to attract investment. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Life was paralyzed in West Bengal on December 14 as the 24-hour nationwide strike called by 56 mass organizations led by CITU, the workers' arm of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM), turned Kolkata into a virtual ghost-town. CITU loyalists deflated tires of vehicles they encountered driving on the streets, and stopped auto rickshaws, taxis, and cars by force (including those of the media, who normally are permitted to travel.) Eastern and South Eastern railways trains running from the two main railway terminals in the city, Sealdah and Howrah, did not operate. Indian airlines cancelled all of its 22 flights to and from Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose International airport and private operators did likewise, stranding thousands of passengers. Almost all shops remained closed throughout the day. The Writers' Buildings, which house state government offices, was largely deserted.

¶3. (U) When asked to comment on the crippling of normal life in the state despite his claims that his government would follow a uniform policy of maintaining normalcy during bandhs, a visibly upset Chief Minister told reporters, "Ask those who called [the general strike]." Though the CM had promised an exemption from the strike for the IT sector, it didn't pan out that way. Transport Minister and CITU vice president Subhas Chakraborty said some IT companies brought their employees to the office the previous evening and kept them in there overnight. When journalists asked Chakraborty why there were no special transportation provisions made for these IT employees, he passed the buck, saying that IT companies had not requested organized transport for their employees. State Chief Secretary Amit Kiran Deb tried to put a positive face on the bandh, noting that "No untoward incident has been reported so far except an occurrence at Arambagh in Hooghly district where police had to remove CITU activists."

¶4. (U) Comment: The latest strike deals a harsh blow to Bhattacharjee's efforts at portraying West Bengal as an investor friendly state. Clearly some elements within the CPM have the capacity and the inclination to counter their fellow party-members' efforts at economic reform. Newspaper headlines

lamented the severe damage bandhs were doing to the economy in West Bengal. The damage may soon start to take its toll if businesses begin to reconsider whether West Bengal is worth the trouble.

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